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SUBJECT: CHURCH AND STATE MAINTAIN BALANCE IN TAY NINH PROVINCE

REF: A) 02 HANOI 199, B) 02 HANOI 208

Summary

1. (U) On a recent one-day trip to meet with provincial and Cao Dai Church leaders in Tay Ninh Province, the Ambassador came away with a mostly positive impression of the current state of health of both the province and the religion which predominates there. Tay Ninh, while still on the fringes of the relative prosperity enjoyed by HCMC and some of its other surrounding provinces, has a leadership clearly committed to economic growth and development. And as the largest single "constituency" within the province, the Cao Dai appear to be benefiting from that commitment -- despite a continued inability to fill their own senior ranks. Our impression was that the Cao Dai faithful are freely practicing their syncretic religion, with even some expansion in their numbers, but as is the case with all religions in Vietnam, the state and party maintain tight control over the religion's organization and personnel. End Summary.

Cao Dai Worship Little Changed in 30 Years

2. (U) The Ambassador recently returned to Tay Ninh Province, on the western border of HCMC, for the first time since his 1970-1973 tour of duty as a junior officer in Vietnam. During that assignment, he was responsible for covering the Cao Dai -- Vietnam's homegrown syncretic religion -- out of Embassy Saigon's political section. Upon entering the Cao Dai Holy See for the noon service, he remarked that very little seemed to have changed in either the physical or spiritual setting. Men and women seated in neat rows on opposite sides of the long rectangular floor of the hall bowed their heads in prayer to a steady beat of gongs and chanting as incense filled the air.

3. (U) Immediately noticeable, however, were the empty chairs closest to the altar reserved for the top church hierarchy -- the Pope and Cardinals. Empty too were the spots on the floor where the archbishops would normally kneel in prayer. (The floor of the temple rises progressively through nine levels as it approaches the sacred altar. Clergy sit in prayer on the level corresponding to their rank.) Otherwise, the service appeared to be well attended. While a fair number of young people were spotted among the worshippers, most of the clergy were well into their 60s. The stunningly decorated temple, painted every year, looked very well maintained.

Lonely at the Top, but Not Really Alone

4. (SBU) After the service, the Ambassador took a guided tour of the temple with the head of the Cao Dai Management Council, Archbishop Thuong Tam Thanh. While Thanh had been reluctant to meet with ConGenoffs last year without prior approval from the provincial People's Committee (ref A), he seemed happy to meet with the Ambassador on this officially sanctioned trip. The Archbishop was animated and upbeat, although he became rather wistful when describing the significance of the vacant chairs and unoccupied spaces on the floor. He noted that he was one of only a handful of clergy at his rank who was still alive. There were supposed to be 33 archbishops at any given time, in keeping with a religious doctrine heavily influenced by numerology.

5. (SBU) Continuing the discussion in his nearby office suite, the Archbishop adopted the disconcerting habit of writing down everything the Ambassador said, despite the presence of others in the large, open-air meeting room serving as note takers. At least a few individuals in the room gave both Ambassador and Poloff the impression that they represented the interests of the GVN more than those of the Cao Dai. The more restrained and formulaic nature of the Archbishop's answers in the office tended to buttress that conclusion. Still, he did openly thank the Ambassador for the invitation to last year's Consulate General July 4th celebration.

Church Flourishes While Leadership Withers

6. (SBU) Early in the conversation, the Archbishop gestured off in the distance at the many structures that had been built during the intervening years since the Ambassador's first tour. "All of this did not happen in one or two years," he said. He claimed a current total of 5 million Cao Dai adherents in Vietnam -- significantly higher than the GVN figure of 1-2 million, or even NGO estimates of 2-3 million -- with the numbers constantly on the

rise. Four hundred thousand Cao Dai make Tay Ninh home, but many others come to worship regularly, including hundreds of thousands who returned on January 9 and August 15 of each lunar year for the two main Cao Dai festivals.

17. (SBU) The Archbishop was less optimistic about the prospects for filling the senior ranks of the clergy because of the unfortunate confluence of old age and limited opportunities for promotion. As one of the conditions for GVN recognition in 1997, exclusive power to make promotion decisions was vested in the newly created Management Council. The Management Council meets only once every five years. While seances had sometimes been used in the past to determine promotions -- a practice outlawed by the GVN as "superstitious" -- selection by high-ranking clergy had always existed as an alternative. Promotion decisions at present are based solely on experience and seniority; no one is allowed to skip a rank. Given the advanced age of most of the higher-ranking clergy and the fact that they can only be promoted one rank every five years, this protracted rate of advancement virtually guarantees that the highest positions will probably remain vacant for some time to come.

18. (SBU) According to the Archbishop, amalgamating the three bodies of Cao Dai clergy -- red, blue, and yellow (legislative, executive, and charitable works) -- into a single Management Council was a by-product of the same limitations. Traditionally, each of the three branches was supposed to have 12 archbishops and one cardinal. However, with only two congresses since 1975 and no way to skip ranks, it was clear that there just would not be sufficient numbers of senior clergy to meet this requirement. In their absence, the Management Council had been created to provide the necessary structure for managing the activities of the church. The 72 members, all high-ranking clergy, were elected every five years at the same congresses which decided promotions. (Over 3000 Cao Dai leaders and government officials from 34 provinces and HCMC attended the October 2002 "Human Life Congress," promoting 924 clergy, including the Archbishop.)

19. (SBU) The Archbishop did not attempt to justify the new system or compare it to the old model. Mostly, he just seemed resigned to it. While he recognized that some Cao Dai, including a number in the U.S., did not appreciate the need for a Management Council or were unhappy over their exclusion, he noted that all religion requires discipline and law. (The Archbishop later asked about the possibility of applying for a visa to meet with Cao Dai officials in the U.S. in the future.) The Archbishop also acknowledged that while the structure was meant to unify all 13 branches of the Cao Dai, some of the smaller sects had always remained separate from the main Tay Ninh branch. Groups which existed outside the Council were not official in GVN eyes, but generally continued to pursue their activities without interference. He resisted criticizing retired pre-1975 Cao Dai leaders Archbishop Thai The Thanh and Archbishop Thuong Nha Thanh (ref B), but clearly disagreed with their decisions to "abandon service" to the Cao Dai faithful.

110. (SBU) Minimizing the intrusiveness of government regulation, the Archbishop dismissed concerns of GVN control over ordination of new clergy -- a common complaint of other religions in Vietnam. After all, the Cao Dai themselves, not the GVN, required verification of "good citizenship" from the relevant local authorities before candidates were considered for the priesthood. He was unable to explain why the Cao Dai had not expressed more interest in political activities, especially in the province where they were most numerous. While he himself had once been a National Assembly member, the Archbishop could think of no other Cao Dai active in national or local politics.

#### Confiscation by Another Name

111. (SBU) Downplaying another common grievance of other religions in Vietnam -- post-war confiscations of property -- the Archbishop tried to rationalize the "borrowing of unused" Cao Dai properties by the Fatherland Front in 1975. He said whenever the Cao Dai needed a property back, they merely had to provide a justification and it was returned. There are currently 600 Cao Dai temples nationwide, by his count. His resolve wavered just a bit when the Ambassador reminisced about the highly regarded educational institutions once operated by the Cao Dai, including the former university which had been converted to a cadre training school. However, the Archbishop quickly pointed out that unlike the Protestant and Catholic religions, the Cao Dai church had never relied on seminaries to train its clergy. Those who showed promising academic qualifications and wished to devote their lives to the Cao Dai faith were brought to the temple for bible study. Success was then based on their actual work record, rather than any sort of book learning. Education was never a determining factor in promotions.

#### People's Committee Upbeat on Economic Fundamentals

112. (SBU) In a separate meeting (in the same compound used by the provincial government before 1975), People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Tan Lam urged the Ambassador to encourage American business investment in Tay Ninh, a province of approximately one million. While the province had yet to feel much impact from the BTA, he

boasted of an 11.7 percent overall increase in GDP, with 10 percent across the board growth in industrial production, agriculture, and services. Industrial output accounted for 34 percent of GDP, but tourism was also a major source of revenue. One hundred percent of the province was already electrified, with 80 percent hooked up to the national power grid. The roads to all villages in the province were paved, although some hamlets were still connected by dirt roads. Clinics manned by physicians served every district. To staff new businesses, Tay Ninh produced 3000 high school graduates last year, with 1550 passing the national university entrance exam. Overall, one third of all school-age children attend school.

113. (SBU) According to the Chairman, the province had attracted a total of 50 FDI projects, valued at US\$240 million. Twenty-seven projects, worth US\$40 million, were invested at the 700-hectare Trang Bang Industrial Park, near the border with HCMC. With Trang Bang nearly 70 percent full, the province was directing new investment to the much larger Moc Bai Economic Zone. Moc Bai, located near the Cambodian border, is the eventual crossing point for the Trans-Asia Highway, connecting HCMC with Cambodia and points west. Vietnam's portion of the highway was expected to be finished this March, but investors recently extended the deadline to July. The Chairman predicted that progress on the Cambodian side of the border would be much slower. Tay Ninh shares a 240-kilometer border with Cambodia.

#### Church and State in Harmony

114. (SBU) Asked to comment by Chairman Lam on the changes he had observed on this first trip back in 30 years, the Ambassador cited the empty ranks at the top of the Cao Dai hierarchy and the new organizational structure. The role of the Fatherland Front in coordinating how the Cao Dai organized their affairs was another notable development. He also regretted GVN restrictions on Cao Dai charitable activities, such as schools and orphanages, and wondered why there were no Cao Dai in positions of authority in the local government when they made up some 40 percent of the population. On the bright side, he praised the familiar images of ordinary people continuing to practice their faith.

115. (SBU) The Chairman was prepared with a number of statistics to show that the Cao Dai faith had actually grown under the GVN. The number of Cao Dai had increased from 35 to 40 percent of the provincial population since 1975, even as the total number of temples had grown from 25-95. The number of high-ranking clergy increased from 1905 to 2144 during the same period, while the number of student priests rose from 1522 to 3480. He was less convincing when he asserted that the issue of replacing the elderly clergy was entirely in the hands of the Cao Dai themselves.

116. (SBU) While the Cao Dai had not generally participated in local political activities after 1975, Chairman Lam assured the Ambassador that the laws of Vietnam give everyone equal access to leadership positions. Some Cao Dai had been active in local People's Councils since 1986, and he thought it entirely possible that a Cao Dai could one day serve as a district Chairman. Despite the current lack of Cao Dai adherents in important positions, he pointed to Tay Ninh as a place where there was great unity between the religious and the secular. The Chairman also praised the Cao Dai for their assistance to flood victims and orphans in the recent past.

#### Comment

117. (SBU) Amidst Tay Ninh's relative political stability, there's little doubt that the province is well positioned to benefit economically from its proximity to HCMC. Decent roads, or at least roads that appeared to be under active construction, led to and from HCMC. Immediate economic returns from improved overland access to the rest of mainland Southeast Asia are less of a sure thing. Tourism, while it will continue to be a big draw, needs to avoid the temptation of appealing to the lowest common denominator. A steady stream of Western and Asian tourists visit the temple each day during the noon service, a staple for inexpensive tours from HCMC. Paving over the greenery and blasting loud music from cheaply constructed souvenir and food stalls, however, is not going to attract a sustained influx of big-spending Western tourists.

118. (SBU) The Archbishop was careful not to express openly any disagreement with the Management Committee structure, but the empty ranks at the top of his religion's hierarchy is obviously a source of frustration and concern. For his part, the Chairman of the People's Committee seems to realize the importance of cultivating relations with the Cao Dai, a job made easier by the fact that the church leadership has completely lost its pre-1975 role as a political entity. Our impression during this short visit to Tay Ninh was that the Cao Dai religion is now treated much the same as Buddhism and Catholicism: worship is fully tolerated, the numbers of the faithful even allowed to expand somewhat, but the party and state maintain tight control over the religion's organizational structure.

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